New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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"Blackouts"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"Blackouts"

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

Ken Murray Brings His 'Blackouts of 1949' From Hollywood and Vine to the Ziegfeld

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After rehearsing in Hollywood for nearly eight years, Ken Murray has brought his "Blackouts" to New York, where it opened at the Ziegfeld last evening. Mr. Murray is a tall gentleman with what used to be known as a pompadour and what is still known as a cigar and an amiable personality. Acting as host in a variety show, he bobs in and out of the program, drumming up applause for his associates and, with a wry grimace, tossing in a few jokes.

* * *

As a matter of fact, the jokes are not exactly hilarious, nor is the show much more than a sequence of bistro diversions. It begins with one of Mr. Murray's "glamourlovelies" (his word) singing something about Mr. Murray into a white telephone instrument, and goes on from there through dance acts, some faintly odoriferous blackout sketches, a Tarzanesque jungle fantasy, a trained bird act and a quick-change version of "Oliver Twist" in which Owen McGiveney acts all the parts with equal turgidity. Since Mr. Murray's "Blackouts" has played in Hollywood for nearly eight years, it may be that the Hollywood business man tires more easily than Gotham's robust merchandisers.

* * *

In the first number, which, incidentally, represents the corner of Hollywood and Vine, a prodigiously flexible young lady bends over backward and picks up with her teeth a handkerchief that must be propped up three feet below the level of her feet. There really should be a diagram here to explain this act. It is mentioned here only because it is an astounding achievement, practically supernatural; and to this dazed student of art, the rest of "Blackouts" is anticlimax.

Having lived so long in Hollywood, Mr. Murray has a lot of confidence in blondes, and has them conspicuously well-stacked throughout the proceedings. His leading lady is Pat Williams, who is particularly noticeable from the front. Unless it is anti-American to say so, even a blonde on the stage needs talent. As a contrast to his blonde "glamourlovelies," Mr. Murray has assembled some aging blondes, whom he describes as "elderlovelies," and whom he sets to dancing, singing and cutting-up because they are obviously overage. This withered and boney charade is not especially elevating, although the "elderlovelies" seem a good deal livelier than the dames.

This column cannot make a full report on the musical achievements of the "Blackouts" for a very unfortunate reason. The show is so noisy that it is hard to hear. Whenever a singer comes to the punch line of a lyric, the trumpets let go with a deafening blast and the drummer puts in some overtime licks that really shake the house. Until Nick Lucas came on in the last end of the show with some lucid songs, the only tunes your reviewer could sort out from the general pandemonium were "Silver Threads Among the Gold" and "Put On Your Old Gray Bonnet"—both contributions of the "elderlovelies."

Mr. Murray is now snuggling close to a luxurious television contract. Possibly that is the chief reason why he has blacked out his "Blackouts" in Hollywood and made the long journey across country. On the basis of the material he has trundled East, this is one of the trips that is not necessary to the safety of the nation. The "Blackouts" is a routine music-hall show put on in an informal manner.

Apropos of music-hall shows, what's become of Professor Lamberti?

"BLACKOUTS"

A variety show conceived and staged by Ken Murray; music and lyrics by Charles Henderson and Royal Foster; settings by Ben Tipton; musical conductor, Bert Shefter; musical arrangements, A. M. Courage; presented by Mr. Murray and David W. Siegel at the Ziegfeld Theatre, September 6, 1949. The players include: Ken Murray, Nick Lucas, Pat Williams, George Burton, Owen McGiveney, D'Vaughn Pershing, Jack Mulhall, Harris and Shore, Les Zoris, Shelton Brooks, Peg Leg Bates, Charles Nelson, Dot Remy, Alphonse Berg, Elizabeth Walters, Irene Kaye, Crystal White, Hightower and Ross, Al Mardo, Danny Duncan, Danny Alexander, Joe Wong, Mabel Butterworth, Milton Charleston.

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

Murray's 'Blackouts' a Pleasant Season's Opener at the Ziegfeld

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Ken Murray, the noted antiquarian and vaudeophile, opened the theatrical season last evening by bringing his collection of odds, ends and bosoms to the Ziegfeld Theatre. It was like Monday afternoon at the Palace in the happy times, with everybody applauding everthing—even the jokes.

In the course of a run of more than seven years in Los Angeles, Mr. Murray — with the aid as co-producer of one David W. Siegel, a lawyer—has disentombed, trapped or remembered a surprisingly varied collection of vaudeville acts. His "Blackouts of 1949" makes a pleasant season's opener, and I don't know why he thought he needed a lawyer when he started the show in June of 1942. If I had paid for my tickets last evening I would not sue Mr. Murray for the money, for I enjoyed the show.

Many Old Favorites.

"Blackouts" is a large number of vaudeville turns plus some pretty girls who stand around looking pretty. One of the handsomest of these decorations, Pat Williams, is perhaps the finest expert at decolletage I've ever seen, but just so-so as a comedienne.

Among the entertainers whom Mr. Murray and his attorney have found are such old favorites as Owen McGiveney, the lightning-change artist who plays all of the roles in a sketch about "Oliver Twist"; Nick Lucas, the troubadour with the guitar; Peg Leg Bates, the amazing and indestructible one-legged hoofer; Alphonse Berge, the man who can drape a dame with a bolt of bombazine in 30 seconds, and Shelton Brooks, the amiable composer of "Some of These Days" and other hits of the old times.

There are some new numbers, too, the most remarkable of them being George Burton and his collection of performing love birds. These gaily colored little feathered friends do some astounding stunts and are easier to see than the trained fleas were at Huber's Museum on 42d St.

New Adagio Team.

Also new to me are Les Zoris (meaning the Zoris, from Paris, France), an adagio team of uncommon agility. Hightower & Shore are excellent burlesquers of ballroom dancing. There is a lad of 14, D'Vaughn Pershing, who plays the piano loud, and another of 15, Charles Nelson, who sings baritone loud. Al Mardo turns up with a hideous fat slob of a bulldog which won't do tricks, and I think a dog act in which there are no tricks is very good.

Mr. Murray works through the show—but not too much. The master of ceremonies who insisted on being on the stage all the time is the guy who killed vaudeville, and Mr. Murray, who helped kill it, has repented. He is pleasant and willing; he gets himself on and off quickly and makes most of his acts do the same. Some of his jokes are on the rough side, but nothing to call the police about.

"Blackouts" is not a brilliant show, but it is entertaining. It ought to run at least seven weeks here.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

The Season Opens —After a Fashion

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Ken Murray's "Blackouts" had been running along in placid contentment for seven years in Hollywood when some mad adventurer had the wild idea of bringing it to New York. It opened at Billy Rose's Ziegfeld Theatre last night and I am afraid that its carefree days are over. Its prices are comparatively inexpensive for a musical show, and, with the current interest in vaudeville and the publicity it has received on the West Coast, there may be a local public for its rough-and-ready antics. But I doubt it. It's a pretty dismal show.

Mr. Murray, a veteran vaudeville and motion picture comic, has assembled a very ordinary music-hall program, added a number of healthy California girls and some commonplace revue numbers, seasoned it lavishly with vulgarity, and attempts to atone for its lack of wit, humor and charm by giving it a blithe air of informality. The formula appears to have worked beautifully in Hollywood, but I suspect that we are harder to please in these parts. A couple of good jokes and a comic sketch or two might have worked wonders, but there aren't any.

Veterans

For old-timers there are a few pleasant touches of nostalgia to soften the pain. Shelton Brooks, who wrote those popular musical classics, "Darktown Strutters' Ball" and "Some of These Days," is present briefly. Jack Mulhall, of silent film days, emerges in two of the sketches. And Owen McGiveney, who, heaven help him, was a vaudeville veteran in the years of my mis-spent youth, is still playing five characters from "Oliver Twist" and changing his costumes and make-up with lightning-like rapidity. It is quite a dizzying sight.

These gentlemen of an earlier day are worthy of attention and applause, but, unhappily, Mr. Murray has seen fit to add some quips which must have been antique when Mr. McGiveney was a boy. For example, at one point a performer says gayly that marriage is a fine institution, but who wants to live in an institution? It is, of course, possibly true that a generation has grown up since that merry jest last sent audiences into stitches, but there is every indication that it has outlived its usefulness. There are other lines of similar vintage.

The Birds

Next to the veterans, the most valuable performers are in the animal acts. Indeed, my favorite member of the cast is a splendidly ugly bulldog, which sensibly refuses to do any tricks at all, thereby putting all of us first-nighters in his debt. Then, there is a versatile and interesting troupe of birds that would be twice as effective if the trainer knew when to stop. I am unable to say whether it is the best bird act in the world, but it is certainly the longest. That dog knew when to quit.

Mr. Murray is frequently in evidence as master of ceremonies and comedian, and it may be said of him that he is painless but not inspiring. Most prominent among the Hollywood damsels is a blonde named Pat Williams, who is remarkably equipped physically and seems to be a good-natured girl. Included in the cast are a rather frightening man called Alphonse Berge, who puts gowns on models with McGiveney-like speed, and the comic dance team of Harris and Shore, which I also found pretty sinister. I hate to seem lacking in hospitality, but maybe Mr. Murray should have stayed in Hollywood.

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

'Blackouts of '49' a Real Bargain at Ziegfeld

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Ken Murray's Blackouts of 1949" opened at the Ziegfeld Theatre last evening and flooded the stage with nostalgia and novelty. It's a cavalcade of two-a-day immortals, pulchritude and hilarious corn. Even the corn sprouts so fast and furiously that it's fascinating.

Murray and David W. Siegel preemed "Blackouts" in Hollywood some eight years ago on a shoestring. Since then, the shoestring has provided plenty of shoes, suits, houses and cars for those lucky enough to work in it. It proves that a guy with an idea and a little money can still find gold without taking to the mountains with a pack and a mule.

This sentimentalist had a wonderful evening watching many of the greats of the past demonstrate for the youngsters why they were great. A lot of our smart kids could learn plenty by taking a post-graduate course in showmanship at the Ziegfeld under the ingratiating tutelage of Maestro Murray.

It was terrific to wander down Memory Lane again. To hear Nick Lucas and his guitar. Nick was a papa of the crooners. He was a king of the records and prohibition niteries. It was a delight to watch Owen McGiveney, ace of the protean artists, revive his one-man version of "Oliver Twist." And this time, Owen makes his sensational quick changes in view of the audience.

It was good to hear Shelton Brooks sing his timeless "Some of These Days" and "Darktown Strutters' Ball." It was just like sitting in Procter's Fifth Avenue, circa 1918-19. We hope Lew Leslie was on hand last evening to see Peg Leg Bates give one of his fanciest displays of whirlwind stepping. And Dorothy Mackail must have been present, with her usual quota of orchids, to cheer her film co-star, Jack Mulhall, in some of the sketches.

Murray also has leavened his show with a lot of newcomers who would have been socko at the Palace or the Riverside. Tops among the new acts is Burton's Birds. George Burton is the man who won an "Oscar" last year for his short called "Bill and Coo," which he made in association with Murray. And after seeing his amazing lovebirds carry a lighted torch across a high wire, do somersaults and operate a laundry, we think he should have received two "Oscars." As Billy Rose put it: "Who said bird brain?"

D'Vaughn Pershing, juvenile whiz on the piano; Les Zoris, brilliant adagioists; Alphonse Berge, who can show your wife how to whip up a Paris creation out of a single piece of cloth in 30 seconds; Al Mardo and the most blase bulldog this side of Yale; Harris & Shore, ballroom burlesquers; Joe Wong, Danny Alexander and Milton Charleston are others meriting enthusiastic salutes.

Marie Wilson, the smart-dumb girl of the movies and radio, worked with Murray for eight years, but couldn't come East with the extravaganza because of air and celluloid commitments. Subbing for her is the curvaceous Pat Williams. Murray also offers scads of other lovelies ranging from teen-agers to some of the spryest oldsters you've seen in a long time.

"Blackouts of 1949" is a real entertainment bargain at a $3.60 top weekdays, and $4.80 weekends. It moves as swiftly as the 20th Century Limited, and it has as few lulls as that hurricane that hit our coast last week. But take a tip from us: don't take the kiddies. The blackouts are not for 'em.

New York World-Telegram

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

'Blackouts of 1949' Highlights Beauties

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The "Blackouts of 1949," a hybrid of vaudeville and revue, is largely dedicated to the proposition that all showgirls were created mammals. It is typical of this amiable grab bag that it takes the outmoded view that if a girl can laugh at falsies and roll her eyes, she need pretend to no further talents.

True to the title, the humor is usually well worn and without presumptions to taste. Ken Murray wanders in and out with an expression of agonized dismay on his pale pieface, bolstering up the morale of everyone but himself.

Sooner or later, and the sooner the better, in a variety show like this, talent will tell. While there are no acts of startling originality on the bill, there are several entertainers in the standard tradition of music hall who stand high in their particular fields, and who provide the bulk of the evening's entertainment.

Nick Lucas Delightful.

From a purely personal point of view, nothing delighted me more than Nick Lucas, as engaging as he was in the first musical talkies a couple of decades ago, and looking just the same. He further won me by performing what must for him be the incredible feat of muffling the lyrics of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips."

Owen McGiveney's quick-change artistry applied to a five-character solo sketch from "Oliver Twist" is a breathless reminder of a nearly lost craft. The fact that much of the dialogue is inarticulate makes no difference—you would much prefer to have Mr. McG. lose his breath if that's what it takes to dissolve like lightning from one character to another.

I never expected to want a lovebird's autograph, but that is the reaction produced by Burton's Birds. These winged midgets have a perky spinsterish charm as they play with fire, turn somersaults and juggle.

Engaging Interlude.

Continuing in the nonhuman vein, there is a mysteriously engaging interlude by Al Mardo's bulldog, a disdainful character vastly superior to the performance of tricks.

Peg Leg Bates is on hand to offer his remarkable one-legged dancing, which so looks as if it ought to shatter his teeth with its impact. Les Zoris, however, outdo him, since neither of them has any respect whatsoever for any bone or joint of the other. This is a sort of areial Apache routine done in leopard skin G-strings with a speed and violence that constantly promises mayhem.

One step removed from an amateur night presentation is the eager, facile music of vocalist Charles Nelson and a pianist with a name so unlikely that it must be real—D'Vaughn Pershing. The principal point of attraction here is that the performers are roughly 15 years old apiece.

A startling comment on theater magic is the contrast between this act and that of Shelton Brooks, who both plays and sings like a beginner in comparison to the youngsters. His own compositions, great hits, stir nostalgic enthusiasm, but beyond that he has charm and distinction behind the lights.

A girl named Betsy Roos comes as close to walking on the ceiling as you're ever likely to see, and the lovely Pat Williams as an assistant M.C. recites some jokes whose meaning you would prefer to believe she did not understand.

Roughly speaking "Blackouts" has something in it to entertain everybody, with no exceptions whatsoever.

Journal American

SEPTEMBER 7, 1949

Ken Murray Makes It a Real Good Show

By ROBERT GARLAND

Following their seven years, two months and three days of prior-to-Broadway previews, Ken Murray and his "Blackouts" have reached Manhattan. Last evening, at the Ziegfeld, they made themselves at home. To look at, to listen to, they suffered no climatic change during their transcontinental trek from Hollywood's North Vine Street to New York's Sixth Avenue.

Even with no stage box to sit in, Ken Murray is what a master of ceremonies should be. As the most successful of vaudeville revivalists, he pulls his sprawling acts together and keeps them on the move whenever they give signs of lagging. I'm not sure what "Blackouts" might be without him. With him, it's a real good show.

It's variety in the actual meaning of the word. A quartet with five vocalists. A Chinaman who sings like Crosby. A chorus of grey-haired grandmothers. Another of gold-haired youngsters. A dog as dumb as a human being. A boy Iturbi. A songsmith who's Shelton Brooks. A Nick Lucas who still tip-toes through the tulips. Adagio dancers—

There's everything, there's anything, especially George Burton and his feathered friends that won Academy Awards for the motion-picture known as "Bill and Coo."

• • •

Love Those Birds

These birds—they're love birds, I believe, although you'd never suspect it—are my best beloved Blackouters. They do all the unbirdlike things their trainer urges. And without a peep of protest. In case the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Birds is interested, they seem as fond of their trainer as he seems fond of them.

Next is Shelton Brooks, a songsmith with both modesty and skill. "Some of These Days" remains his favorite composition. And he steals it back from Sophie Tucker to claim it as his own. D'Vaughn Pershing plays boogie-woogie in public almost as enthusiastically as Jose Iturbi plays it, for his friends. And better than Charlie Nelson sings.

It's a pleasure to have adagioists on-stage again. Les Zoris, making their American debut, are in the real adagio tradition. And, although Ken Murray says they know no word of English, they understand the applause "Blackouts"-goers give them. This time, she's a Leopardess and he a strength-and-health-like Jungle Man.

Surrounded by the singing Enchanters, the dancing Crystal White and the Glamorlovelies dressed like Ladies of the Forest, Les Zoris are the "Jungle Fantasy."

• • •

Ken Is Wonderful

Ken Murray's "Blackouts" is tops when it stays away from blackouts. These, I fear, are neither fresh nor funny. But, to tell the truth, the master of ceremonies seems not to like them, either. So he gets them over as quickly and as quietly as possible. Sometimes he groups them in twos and threes. And, as in the mixup between the bedroom and the bathroom, they're over before you realize they've started.

But, beginning with "Hollywood and Vine," where anything can — and does! — happen, "Blackouts" is oldtime Keith vaudeville with a dash of oldtime Minsky burlesque and a leveling of Ken Murray's masterly master-of-ceremonying. I, for one, could take more of Ken and less of the blackouts which give his show its title.

Which is not to say that Pat Williams, taking over for Marie Wilson for a couple of excellent reasons; Harris and Shore, who could pinchhit for The Hartmans; Al Mardo, whose material escapes me; Owen McGiveney, who acts all of "Oliver Twist" in full view of the audience, and Peg Leg Bates, the peg leg dancer, aren't entertaining. But—

Even so, "Blackouts" is bigger and better when Ken Murray sits down outside the stage and kids his "Sports Parade" as only he can kid it. "Blackouts" is best when it's all Ken Murray's.